



COMMITTEE of the WHOLE

CITY COUNCIL

MINUTES
July 31, 2012
5:00 P.M.

COUNCIL MEMBERS PRESENT:

D. Reed, D. Sterner, S. Marmarou, M. Goodman-Hinnershitz

OTHERS PRESENT:

L. Kelleher, C. Younger, M. Bembenick, R. Schuenemann, M. Setley, D. Miller, M. Dallas, L. Murin

The Committee of the Whole meeting was called to order at 5:10 pm by Council Vice President Goodman-Hinnershitz.

I. RAWA Customer Service & Billing

Mr. Marmarou questioned why RAWA hired four employees from the Citizens Service Center (CSC) if they did not intend to allow the payment of water bills at the new facility. He expressed the belief that the new building is ample enough to allow RAWA with the ability to accept payment.

Mr. Miller stated that RAWA never intended to provide collection/payment services at the new facility, located on the Kutztown Road. He said that RAWA wants to avoid the public safety issues that taking payment would create. He stated that the majority of people paying in person pay in cash, which opens the facility up to robbery/burglary and creates employee accountability issues. He noted that there would be an associated expense with providing the required public safety and security if payments were accepted at the new facility.

Mr. Setley stated that before the new facility opened City Hall was the only place a customer could pay in person. Now there are six locations within Berks County where payments can be made. He stated that customers can now pay online (by credit card or ACH) or through the mail. He noted that since the new facility opened approximately 700 customers have registered to pay online.

Mr. Setley and Mr. Miller explained that the RAWA Board wanted to continue to allow cash payments and alternatives explored to accomplish this requirement. They stated that even Western Union, who accepts electric and gas payments at grocery stores only accepts money orders and checks, no cash. They stated that Fulton Bank was the only organization who agreed to accept cash payments. Fulton's fee is approximately \$90K per year. They noted the fee charged covers multiple services, not only bill paying.

Ms. Reed noted the disconnect that is created when a customer must go to the RAWA building to resolve a billing issue then go to some other place to pay. Mr. Miller stated that RAWA has never accepted payment at their office since they were created. Ms. Reed countered that when RAWA was in City Hall a customer only had to go down the hall to make payment.

Mr. Miller noted that no other utility (electric and gas) allow payment at their facility. He suggested that many of the customer issues are the result of change in the location and in the processes.

In response to a question relating to the volume of customers who come to the downtown Fulton to pay their water bills on the last day of the month, Mr. Miller expressed the belief that the situation was created through the glitch that delayed the customer receipt of the bill until the end of the month. This situation created a sense of urgency which probably created the rush. He stated that it is RAWA goal to continue to improve the billing process so the bills can be mailed and received by customers during the first week of the month, which would provide them with almost 30 days to pay. However, he noted that many customers paying in cash choose to delay payment until the day the bill is due.

Mr. Waltman arrived at this time.

Mr. Miller distributed a handout about the new services RAWA now provides and copies of emails from Fulton executives reporting that they are pleased with how program with RAWA and its customers is going.

Mr. Miller described the new online services available and reviewed the handout.

Ms. Goodman-Hinnershitz inquired about the call volume at RAWA. Mr. Miller stated that the highest number of calls per month is 948 and the lowest is 178. He stated that RAWA holds a minimum of two conference calls per week with Fulton to provide training and ongoing information about issues that arise.

Ms. Goodman-Hinnershitz expressed the belief that change causes difficulties for many customers.

Mr. Setley expressed the belief that RAWA has done an excellent job at improving customer service.

Mr. Waltman inquired about the indirect costs currently charged by the City. Mr. Setley stated that the indirect charges still exist due to the two year lag in charging for the indirect costs. Mr. Waltman noted the need for RAWA to understand how the indirect costs compare to actual costs which RAWA will now need to cover.

Mr. Murin stated that before the move 50% of the calls coming into the CSC were water related; however, Maximus only charged RAWA 13% for this indirect cost. Mr. Setley agreed that the 13% was inaccurate and did not cover all affected service areas.

Mr. Miller stated that the next bills are scheduled to go out around August 10th. He also noted the correction of the interface with the meter reading software which historically lowered estimated bills. He also described the ongoing problems with tampered meters along with meter certification and testing.

Ms. Kelleher inquired when the City would receive “Read Only” access to water accounts. She noted the need to have this information to assist customers who call. Mr. Miller stated that at the last meeting with the Administration this issue was discussed and the City was asked to provide information on the type of information to be viewed. To date a response has not been obtained.

II. Recycling and Trash Billing

Mr. Bembenick stated that the Administration is having a kick off meeting next week to discuss the Mayor’s desire to move the trash and recycling billing to RAWA.

Mr. Setley stated that RAWA has discussed the request to add trash and recycling to the water/sewer bill. He stated that there would not be an additional charge for this addition. He stated that RAWA only needs to learn if the City wants those utilities to be billed monthly, quarterly or annually.

Ms. Kelleher stated that currently recycling is billed annually and trash is billed annually to owner occupied properties and quarterly to rental properties.

Mr. Bembenick stated that the City needs to make that decision based on its revenue needs. He stated that in general it seems that the proper billing framework is able to handle adding these utilities.

Ms. Goodman-Hinnershitz stated that this bundled bill will create another level of customer concerns and questions. Mr. Murin stated that bundling the bills will save the City money.

Mr. Waltman inquired about how partial payments would be apportioned. Mr. Setley stated that partial payments will be handled in the same way they currently are handled; if a customer makes a 50% payment on the water/sewer bill, the payment is split between the water portion and the sewer portion.

Mr. Setley excused himself to attend another meeting.

Ms. Goodman-Hinnershitz inquired about RAWA's ability to track water main issues and potential breaks. Mr. Miller explained the technology that allows RAWA to constantly monitor water main issues and predict where problems could occur.

The Committee of the Whole meeting adjourned at 6:10 pm.

*Respectfully Submitted by
Linda A. Kelleher, CMC, City Clerk*